

# The Course of Study for Special Education Schools and Its Revision

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In Japan, the Course of Study which is the national standard for curriculum is issued separately for kindergartens, elementary schools, lower secondary schools, upper secondary schools, and special education schools. Each Course of Study is revised approximately every ten years in order to respond to the needs of the time and society. The Course of Study for special education schools was recently revised in March 1999. This paper introduces outlines of curriculum in special education schools and the Course of Study as curricular standards.

## 1. Special Education Schools and their Curriculum

Special education schools in Japan are categorized into schools for the blind, schools for the deaf, schools for other disabled children (intellectually disabled, physically disabled, or health impaired). Each school possesses an elementary department (equivalent to elementary school) and a lower secondary department (equivalent to lower secondary school). In addition, most schools for the blind and schools for the deaf possess a kindergarten department (equivalent to kindergarten) and an upper secondary department (upper secondary school). Most of schools for the other disabled children possess an upper secondary department while only a few of them possess a kindergarten department.

This paper focuses on elementary and lower secondary departments.

The curriculum in the elementary and lower secondary departments consists of four areas, which are subjects, moral education, special activities, and educational therapeutic activities (JIRITSU KATSUDO), as well as period for integrated study. The educational therapeutic activities are a guidance area unique to special education schools as well as all special education schools are required to offer. This is because the educational therapeutic activities have an aim that "individual children learn the knowledge, skills, attitude, and habits necessary to actively improve and conquer various difficulties caused by their disabilities and to nurture foundations for harmonious mental and physical development while aiming at independence."

Subjects, moral education, and special activities are in principle taught based upon the content of individual subjects in elementary schools and lower secondary schools. For subjects in schools for the intellectually disabled, however, subjects consisting of special objectives and contents are offered in consideration of disabilities so that the guidance given matches the level of development.

The period for integrated study is an educational activity period which was created in the most recent revision. The purposes for establishing this period are (1) individual schools will have time to offer creative and unique educational activities that match the realities of communities and children and (2) schools will have time to smoothly implement broad and integrated learning that transcend a simple framework of subjects in order to nurture qualities and abilities that allow children to respond to societal changes including internationalization and information-related changes. The period will be offered at all schools including special education schools. Further details will be discussed below.

## 2. The Course of Study and Its Revision

### (1) The Objectives and Basic Policies of the Revision

The recent revision aims for children to acquire human characters rich in spirit as well as basic knowledge and skills, to develop their personalities, and to nurture "living power" which allows individuals to learn and think on their own. The revision followed the five fundamental objectives listed below. Objectives (1) ~ (4) are common for all children.

- (1) To encourage the development of young people who are rich in heart and well equipped to contribute to society, as well as young people with an increased awareness of themselves as members of an international community.
- (2) To enhance ability of children to think and learn for themselves.
- (3) To develop a comfortable educational environment which successfully equips students with essential knowledge and skills as well as developing students' individual personalities.
- (4) To encourage each school to seek out its own special characteristics and redefine itself as a

unique site of distinctive education.

- (5) To further improve careful guidance in accordance with the disabilities of individual children.

Concretely, improvements were made based upon the following five criteria.

- Appropriate response to severe, multiple, and diversified disabilities

To make improvements with the aim of giving more importance to guidance in response to individual conditions.

- Appropriate educational response from an early stage

To make improvements in educational guidance to include infants below three years old.

- Promotion of occupational independence

To make improvements in subject offering and educational content with the objective of nurturing individual occupational and work ethics among students in upper secondary departments and further promote occupational independence.

- Response to students with mild disabilities

To make improvements in guidance content and others in order to further promote education in accordance with the realities faced by each student receiving guidance in special classes or resource rooms.

## (2) Main Content of the New Course of Study

The new Course of Study was revised based upon above described objectives and basic policies. The principal content of the Course of Study for elementary departments and lower secondary departments will be introduced below including the relevant revised regulations. The Course of Study for elementary and lower secondary departments consists of chapters of "general rules," "subjects," "moral education," "special activities," and "educational therapeutic activities."

### a. General Rules

General rules consist of items relating to educational objectives and curriculum formation (such as the number of class hours, periods for integrated study, special cases for the multiply disabled, transactional programs between ordinary schools and special education schools, educational guidance from early ages, etc.).

#### (a) Educational Objectives

In addition to educational objectives for elementary school and lower secondary school, that is, for children without disabilities, the Course of Study for special education schools stipulates that students are "to learn the knowledge, skills, attitude, and habits

necessary to actively improve and conquer various difficulties caused by their disabilities" as their educational objective.

#### (b) Period for Integrated Study

The period for integrated study was established in the most recent revision. It aims to offer educational activities taking advantage of individual school's originality, for example, broad and integrated learning as well appropriate responses to the interest and curiosity of children in accordance with the realities of individual communities and children.

The period for integrated study deals with issues including broad and integrated topics such as international understanding, information, the environment, and welfare, topics concerning the interest and curiosity of children, and topics that characterize communities and schools. Through a variety of methods such as nature and community experiences, observation and experiments, visits and investigations, presentations and discussions, craft making, and learning through problem solving, children are encouraged to develop the ability to resolve issues by themselves, to learn by themselves, to think by themselves, to form judgments independently, and to solve problems in a more desirable way.

#### (c) Special Provisions for the Multiply Disabled and Others

The Course of Study contains a specific provision to allowing special guidance for children with severe or multiple disabilities. Listed below are some of the major exceptions.

- (1) For children who face difficulty in learning subject content at their actual age level, it is acceptable to teach content below their actual grade level.
- (2) For children with both intellectual and physical disabilities, it is acceptable to teach content used by schools for the intellectually disabled.
- (3) For children with severe learning disabilities, it is acceptable to teach mainly educational therapeutic activities without subject teaching.

### b. Subjects, Moral Education, and Special Activities

Subjects, moral education, and special activities are to be taught in principle with the content stipulated in the Course of Study for elementary schools and lower secondary schools.

Subjects in schools for the intellectually disabled, however, may include original subjects that allow guidance in accordance with developmental level. For example, the objectives as well as the contents of level 1 (out of three levels, not by grade) for the

"Japanese language" curriculum taught in elementary department are presented below.

<Elementary Department "Japanese Language">

Objective: To nurture the ability and attitude to understand and express the Japanese language necessary for daily living.

Contents: (Level 1)

- (1) To listen to a teacher talking or reading story books.
- (2) To respond to a teacher talking to a child and to express thoughts using facial expressions, gestures, voice, or simple words.
- (3) To enjoy story books and similar activities with a teacher.
- (4) To become familiar with writing using a variety of writing utensils.

c. Educational Therapeutic Activities

Educational therapeutic activities are a guidance area that is established only for special education schools and are meant to serve as educational activities for children to improve and conquer various difficulties caused by their disabilities on their own.

Therefore, the guidance content in the educational therapeutic activities differs depending upon the details of individual disabilities. The Course of Study presents four or five items as criteria when teachers

choose guidance content in each of the five categories: "health maintenance," "psychological stability," "understanding the environment," "physical movements," and "communication." The following is an example relating to communication.

Category: Communication

- (1) Things relating basic communication ability
- (2) Things relating to receptivity and expression of language
- (3) Things relating to language formation and utilization
- (4) Things relating to the selection and utilization of a means for communication
- (5) Things relating to communication in accordance with situational circumstances

From among the five categories mentioned above and items offered for each category, teachers are to select the appropriate items in accordance with the disabilities of individual children, to organize the items into guidance content, and to teach said content.

This paper introduced the main provisions of the new Course of Study. As presented, it is possible in Japan to organize curriculum and conduct teaching in accordance with conditions of individual children's disabilities and levels of development.